CR ConsumerReports®

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On Health

The Truth About What's Good for You

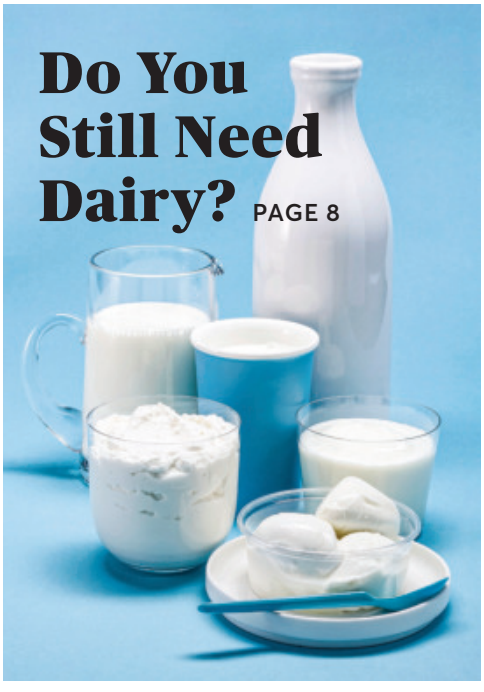
HOW TO BEAT A BAD COLD OR FLU

The best home remedies and meds PAGE 6

LIFT THINGS MORE EASILY PAGE 9

7 Foods With Surprising Health Benefits PAGE 4

Do You Still Need Dairy? PAGE 8



THE TREATMENTS THAT REALLY WORK FOR HEARTBURN PAGE 10

Stop That Pain Quickly

Yoga, massage, and meditation can help **PAGE 3**

PLUS • **Get Plastics Out of Your Food** Page 2 • **Hear Better at Home** Page 11 • **Tips for Good Balance** Page 12

ConsumerReports®

On Health

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Plastics in Our Food?

CR's tests found plenty. How to reduce your exposure.

SUBSTANCES KNOWN AS plasticizers are routinely used to make plastic more flexible and durable. And plasticizers (those known as phthalates and their substitutes are the most common types) and bisphenols (other chemicals in plastic, such as BPA) are widespread in our foods, according to recent CR tests of 85 grocery store foods and fast foods, all packaged in cans, pouches, foil, or other material.

That's concerning because there's increasing evidence that these chemicals can threaten our health. For instance, growing research shows that they can interfere with the production and regulation of estrogen and other hormones. This, in turn, can contribute to an increased risk of health problems such as diabetes, obesity, cardiovascular disease, and certain cancers.

CR experts want the government to get plasticizers out of our food. But until that happens, these steps can help reduce your overall exposure to chemicals found in plastic.

- Use glass or steel water bottles, and store food in glass or steel containers instead of plastic. If you use plastic containers, don't store hot food in them or use them to heat food in the microwave.
- Avoid fast foods. In our testing we found some of the highest levels of phthalates and their substitutes in fast food.
- Eat fresh, minimally processed food, including plenty of unpackaged fruits and vegetables.
- Use wood, stainless steel, or silicone kitchen tools instead of plastic.

For our full report on plastics in food and to sign a petition asking the Food and Drug Administration to take the appropriate action, go to **CR.org/foodplastic.**

THIS MONTH'S EXPERTS

We contact health authorities and medical researchers from across the country. Here are some of the experts we consulted this month:

Natalie B. Allen, RD, clinical associate professor, Missouri State University, Springfield.

Kathryn Boling, MD, family medicine doctor, Mercy Medical Center, Baltimore.

Jennifer Brach, PhD, PT, professor of physical therapy, University of Pittsburgh.

Andrew T. Chan, MD, MPH, gastroenterologist and chief of the clinical and translational epidemiology unit, Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston.

Samantha M. Coogan, RDN, program director, didactic program in nutrition and dietetics, University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

Melissa Green, PharmD, geriatric pharmacist, University of Utah Hospital, Salt Lake City.

Zhaoping Li, MD, chief of clinical nutrition, David Geffen School of Medicine, UCLA.

Todd Manini, PhD, co-director, Claude D. Pepper Older Americans Independence Center, University of Florida, Gainesville.

William Schaffner, MD, infectious disease specialist, Vanderbilt University School of Medicine, Nashville, Tenn.

PHOTOS, COVER, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: GETTY IMAGES; ADOBE STOCK (2); GETTY IMAGES; ADOBE STOCK.
PHOTO, THIS PAGE: SARAH ANNE WARD

Health Wire

Water Workout Benefits

High-intensity interval training (where you speed up for short bursts, then slow down) in a pool was as effective as "land-based" HIIT, according to an analysis of 18 studies. (Water exercises included pool walking, aerobics, cycling, and strength training.) Water takes the pressure off joints, so it can be helpful for people with arthritis.

Source: BMJ Open Sport & Exercise Medicine, Nov. 14, 2023.

TRY THIS FOR PAIN RELIEF

People with chronic pain often miss out on drug-free treatments for relief, a survey of 7,422 older adults found. While those ages 65 and up might go to physical therapy for pain, they're less apt to use effective therapies like exercise (including yoga), talk therapy, meditation, and massage. If you often have pain, ask your doctor which might be best for you.

Source: Annals of Internal Medicine, Nov. 14, 2023.

Your Brain Loves Whole Grains

Older adults who ate three daily servings of whole grains—like whole-wheat bread, oatmeal, quinoa—and popcorn had slower declines in thinking and memory compared with those who ate one serving or less, according to a study. (The participants were African American.) Whole grains may reduce inflammation and keep the immune system healthy.

Source: Neurology, Nov. 22, 2023.

LOWER BLOOD PRESSURE FAST

A study found that seven days of very low consumption of salt reduced systolic blood pressure (the top number) by 6 points, comparable to the effects of some meds. Participants got a week of meals and snacks containing 500 milligrams of sodium per day, far less than the American Heart Association's recommended limit of 2,300 daily mg.

Source: Journal of the American Medical Association, Nov. 11, 2023.

Another Reason to Get More Sleep

Skimping on sleep by 1½ hours a night hiked insulin resistance (trouble absorbing blood sugar) by more than 20 percent in older women, a Columbia University study found. Getting less than 7 to 9 hours of shut-eye a night may, over time, contribute to a higher risk of diabetes.

Source: Diabetes Care, Nov. 13, 2023.

A Positive Attitude May Increase Longevity

Less than 10 percent of the participants in a study who had the most optimistic views about growing older died over nine years, while the most pessimistic faced a 45 percent risk of death. At the study's start, 5,483 adults were surveyed about their health, lifestyle, and perspectives on aging. Researchers then tracked their longevity. New activities, those that give a sense of purpose, and being social can improve your outlook on aging, the American Heart Association says.

Source: The Gerontologist, Oct. 26, 2023.

PHOTOS, FROM TOP: GETTY IMAGES (3); ADOBE STOCK

7 Foods With Surprising Health Benefits

These are often overlooked, but they pack plenty of nutrition

WHEN IT COMES TO healthy eating, you have the basics down. You fill your grocery cart with whole-wheat bread, chicken breasts, fresh veggies, and berries. While these are all nutritious staples, you may be missing out on other good-for-you foods. Why? Even savvy consumers can hold on to outdated diet ideas, says Natalie B. Allen, RD, clinical associate professor at Missouri State University in Springfield. Or you may not be familiar with certain foods, such as kimchi or sourdough bread. Want to shake up your usual rotation? Consider adding the following foods to your meals and snacks.

Grapes

Some people think of grapes as little globes of sugar. It's true they're one of the sweetest fruits, with 12 grams of sugar per half-cup. But the sugar in fruit is absorbed more slowly and doesn't cause the same blood sugar spikes as table sugar, says Samantha M. Coogan, RDN, program director of the didactic program in nutrition and dietetics at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Blood sugar spikes and crashes can deplete your energy and, over time, raise the risk for type 2 diabetes.

Eating grapes may actually fend off the disease. A 2013 analysis published in BMJ showed that having about three servings of grapes (and raisins) per week was linked to a 12 percent lower risk for type 2 diabetes. "Grapes also come packaged with fiber and vitamin K, which is important for heart and bone health," she says. Plus, they contain resveratrol, a powerful antioxidant that studies suggest may help reduce the risk of a list of chronic illnesses, including heart disease, some cancers, and Alzheimer's disease.

Chicken Thighs

Dark meat has a reputation for being fatty, but the difference between chicken thighs and breasts is minimal, says Allen. Four ounces of skinless thighs have 200 calories and 2.6 grams of saturated fat vs. 180 calories and about 1 gram of saturated fat in the same amount of breast meat. Chicken breast has slightly more protein, but thighs contain more iron, a mineral lacking in many older adults' diets.

Chicken thighs are less expensive, more flavorful, and easier to cook, says Elisabetta Politi, RD, a dietitian at Duke Lifestyle and Weight Management Center in Durham, N.C. "They don't dry out as quickly as breasts." For a quick dinner, toss thighs and vegetables with herbs, spices, and a little olive oil and roast at 425° F for 30 minutes.

Sourdough Bread

Even though most sourdough loaves are made with white flour, it's a smarter pick than a traditional white bread. The difference is that sourdough uses a fermented flour and water "starter" containing natural yeast instead of commercial yeast. (If yeast is in the ingredients list, the bread isn't made with a fermented starter.) As the dough rises, it creates acids that slow the absorption of starches. As a result, "sourdough doesn't raise blood sugar as quickly as regular white bread," says Politi. According to a 2019 Italian review of research, sourdough has a lower

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES (3)

glycemic index—a measure of how a food affects blood sugar—than unfermented white and whole-wheat bread.

Leftover Pasta, Rice, and Potatoes

Don't toss out last night's leftovers. Refrigerating cooked rice, pasta, and potatoes rearranges the starch molecules, forming a type of fiber called resistant starch. It's broken down in the large intestine, which creates short-chain fatty acids that feed healthy bacteria in the gut. And blood sugar levels may rise more slowly after meals with resistant starch. According to a 2015 study in Asia Pacific Journal of Clinical Nutrition, cooked white rice that had cooled for a day had 2.5 times the amount of resistant starch as freshly cooked rice—and led to a smaller blood sugar response. The amount of resistant starch didn't change much when the cold rice was reheated. While more research on resistant starch is needed, studies suggest that it may help protect against diabetes, weight gain, and certain cancers.

Popcorn

When it's not swimming in butter and salt, popcorn is one of the healthiest snacks. "Popcorn is a whole grain," says Coogan. "It's high in fiber that slows digestion, so you feel full for longer." A 3-cup serving delivers 3.5 grams of fiber—roughly

14 percent of the total amount you need each day—for only 91 calories. This snack also packs in protective antioxidants called polyphenols. Research suggests that ferulic acid, one of popcorn's antioxidants, lowers blood pressure and cholesterol buildup in the arteries, which may fend off diabetes and heart disease. For the healthiest popcorn, make it yourself on the stove or in an air-popper and season it with a little avocado or olive oil or butter, salt, and spices. Bagged and microwave popcorns can be high in unhealthy saturated fat and sodium (check the Nutrition Facts label). And the bags used for microwave popcorn may contain harmful PFAS chemicals that may leach into the kernels.

Coleslaw

No need to skip this creamy barbecue staple. "Compared to other dishes like mac and cheese or potato salad, coleslaw is the obvious choice," says Coogan. "It's lower in calories and fat, and higher in vitamins." That's because cabbage, the star of coleslaw, is rich in fiber, vitamin C, and glucosinolates, compounds that may protect cells against cancer-causing damage. In a 2013 Annals of Oncology research review, people who ate the most cabbage slashed their risk for colorectal cancer by 24 percent compared with those who rarely ate the vegetable. And mayo, which is used to make coleslaw, is low in cholesterol-raising saturated fat; ½ cup of coleslaw has just 1.5 grams.

Kimchi

A staple in Korean cuisine, kimchi—made of veggies (usually cabbage) and hot pepper paste—adds a spicy, sour kick to meals. Because it's fermented, it delivers "good" bacteria called probiotics, which may help with inflammation, digestion, and gut health. According to a 2023 review in the Journal of Ethnic Foods, eating kimchi regularly was linked to a number of health benefits, such as lowering cholesterol, body fat, and blood pressure. It can also increase the diversity of the natural "good" bacteria that live in your gut. Use it as a condiment in rice and egg dishes, or add it to sandwiches or tacos.

LEARN

For more healthy eating ideas, go to CR.org/meatlessmeals.

STEER CLEAR OF THESE EATS

Many foods that seem to be good for you may not live up to their reputation. The next time you're at the store, think twice before you pick up one of these items.

› **Bran muffins.** Although they do contain fiber, the fiber can't compensate for the calories and amount of added sugar in some large bran muffins. They can have as much or more of both as a slice of chocolate cake.

› **Fat-free salad dressing.** Fat helps your body absorb key nutrients in veggies, such as vitamins A, E, and K. "And, when manufacturers remove fat from an item, they often replace it with extra sugar or sodium," says Elisabetta Politi, RD.

› **Protein bars.** Many are highly processed, made with isolated protein powders, added sugars, and sodium. Look for those with a simple ingredients list, such as nuts and fruit, and 6 grams or less of added sugars.

› **Fruit-flavored yogurt.** Yogurt is high in calcium and probiotics, but fruit-flavored brands can contain as much as 13 grams—or 3 teaspoons—of added sugars per container. A better bet: Top plain yogurt with fruit.

› **Spinach wraps.** Don't be fooled by their color: Spinach wraps are usually made with refined flour and a little spinach powder, says Natalie B. Allen, at Missouri State University. "They're not that much different nutrition-wise as a regular white flour wrap." And one wrap can have 200 calories, about the same as in two slices of bread.

How to Beat a Bad Cold or the Flu

Here, remedies to help ease your aches, coughing, and fever—and sometimes even shorten a viral infection

UPPER RESPIRATORY infections such as the common cold and flu can certainly make you miserable. What works to help you feel better ... faster?

Some over-the-counter drugs you may have turned to when you were younger may be less useful or appropriate now, says Rebecca Masutani, MD, an assistant professor at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai Brookdale Department of Geriatrics & Palliative Medicine in New York City. "Oftentimes they don't work and may even carry health risks."

In fact, according to a Food and Drug Administration advisory panel, there's insufficient evidence that the recommended dose of oral phenylephrine (used in many cough and cold meds as a decongestant) is effective. Here's a look at which OTC and home remedies can really help ease your symptoms–plus when to consider prescription drugs and what's best to skip altogether.

Home Remedies That Work

Some of the safest and most effective cold remedies can be found in your own home, Masutani says. These include:

› **Honey.** This is often recommended for coughs in children, but it works for adults too, says Michael Hochman, MD, an internist in Los Angeles. A review of studies published in 2020 in the British Medical Journal backs that up. Try adding a spoonful to a cup of warm herbal tea, Masutani says. The liquid can help hydrate you and ease congestion, while the honey can ease coughing and soothe throat pain. (If you have diabetes or prediabetes, Hochman advises talking to your doctor first.)

› **Chicken soup.** "One of the biggest complications of upper respiratory infections like cold and flu among older adults is dehydration," Hochman says. "Chicken soup hydrates you and provides electrolytes." A 2000 study even suggested that it has anti-inflammatory properties.

› **A cool-mist humidifier.** Dry air can worsen nasal congestion, Hochman says. A humidifier set to 30 to 50 percent humidity should produce enough moisture.

› **Salt-water gargling.** Dissolve one half to 1 teaspoon of salt in a glass of warm water, gargle with the solution, then spit it out. Repeat as often as you like to help loosen mucus, relieve throat pain, and ease nasal congestion, says Kathryn Boling, MD, a family medicine doctor at Mercy Medical Center in Baltimore.

› **Sleep with your head elevated.** "It allows your sinuses to drain, so you don't wake up in the middle of the night with a blocked-up nose," says William Schaffner, MD, an infectious disease specialist at the Vanderbilt University School of Medicine in Nashville, Tenn. "Just an extra pillow or two can make a big difference."

OTC Meds to Consider

While there's no one-size-fits-all treatment approach, you might want to have the following on hand:

› **Acetaminophen.** This can help relieve fever, headache, and muscle aches, Masutani says. It's safe for most older adults to take up to 3,000 mg a day.

› **Saline nasal rinses.** In general, these are safe and work well to flush mucus out of the nasal cavity, according to Hochman. You can use them at least several times a day. A similar option is a neti pot.

› **Nasal sprays.** If saline rinses don't do the trick, consider an OTC nasal decongestant such as oxymetazoline (Afrin and generic), but only for a couple days,

ILLUSTRATIONS: NEIL WEBB

says Melissa Green, PharmD, a geriatric pharmacist at the University of Utah Hospital in Salt Lake City. After more than 72 hours, these can cause rebound congestion because they affect how blood vessels work. Also, check with your doctor or pharmacist ahead of time if you have heart-related conditions.

› **Expectorants.** Guaifenesin (Mucinex and generic) thins mucus and makes it easier for you to cough it up. While this can be helpful, drinking plenty of fluids may have the same effect, according to Green.

› **Cough drops.** They can help relieve sore throat pain and quell a dry cough, Boling says. Ingredients that end with "caine" (like benzocaine) temporarily numb the throat.

Think Twice About These

Older adults should avoid or be cautious about certain ingredients often found in combination cough and cold meds, Green says. Combo drugs may also contain acetaminophen. So if you take acetaminophen on its own and add a multi-ingredient med, you might get too much.

› **Pseudoephedrine and phenylephrine.** Despite the FDA's finding about phenylephrine, you may still find products with it on store shelves. These decongestants aren't advised for older adults because they can hike heart rate and blood pressure, Green says.

› **Diphenhydramine.** This antihistamine (Benadryl and generic) is often said to help with sneezing and a runny nose, Masutani says. But it can cause side effects like dizziness and drowsiness.

› **Dextromethorphan.** Green says that with older adults, "we've seen cases of dizziness and confusion" in those using this cough suppressant, which is found in Delsym, Robitussin, and other products. "It seems to impact older adults differently from younger ones."

› **Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatories.** Ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin, and generic) and naproxen (Aleve and generic) can ease pain and fever but carry a higher risk of gastrointestinal bleeding in older adults.

When You Need a Prescription

Because older adults are more likely to develop complications from the flu or COVID-19, if you have a cough, fever, and nasal congestion, see your doctor or go to an urgent care clinic for flu and COVID-19 testing, Schaffner says. If you're positive for either, you should get a prescription for an antiviral drug.

"Antivirals reduce the chance that your milder illness will go on to become more severe," he says. "The goal is to keep you out of the hospital, and possibly even slightly shorten the duration of the time that you're sick."

For the flu, a prescription antiviral such as oseltamivir (Tamiflu and generic) taken for five days can help you recover faster. And for COVID-19, your doctor may recommend the antivirals nirmatrelvir and ritonavir (taken together as the medication Paxlovid). A 2022 review published in the journal Clinical Infectious Disease found that it reduced the risk of severe COVID-19 by 46 percent. "I recommend it for most older adults because it will help them keep you out of the emergency room," Schaffner says.

WHAT ABOUT SUPPLEMENTS?

Certain supplements are said by some to help prevent or ease the symptoms of respiratory infections. But can these over-the-counter products really help?

Products such as echinacea, elderberry, and vitamin C may be popular, but the best evidence may be for supplements of zinc.

"There's some evidence that if you take at least 75 mg a day of zinc lozenges starting from the day you begin to experience symptoms, it can shorten the time you feel sick," says Melissa Green, PharmD, a geriatric pharmacist at the University of Utah Hospital in Salt Lake City.

But you'll want to be aware that zinc lozenges can cause unpleasant side effects, such as stomach upset or a bad or altered taste in the mouth.

If you're considering taking zinc supplements, Green suggests that you talk with your doctor first. High levels of zinc may interfere with medications, including some antibiotics.

LEARN

For tips on preventing respiratory infections, go to **CR.org/prevention**.

When to See Your Doctor

It's a good idea to see your healthcare provider anytime you develop symptoms of a respiratory infection, to rule out the flu or COVID-19, says Ronan Factora, MD, a geriatrician at the Cleveland Clinic. And after that initial visit, you'll want to get in touch with your doctor again—and do so right away—if you experience any of the following problems:

- Trouble breathing or breathing that's unusually rapid.
- Dehydration. (Dark urine may be a sign.)
- A fever that lasts for more than four days.
- Other symptoms, such as coughing or fever, that last more than 10 days without getting significantly better.
- Symptoms that improve but then return or worsen.
- The worsening of a chronic medical condition.

Do You Still Need Dairy?

The latest on whether cow's milk, yogurt, and cheese are really good for you

MANY OF US GREW UP believing that a healthy diet includes plenty of milk and other dairy foods. But there's conflicting data about whether you need dairy or even if it really is good for you. What's more, new products in the dairy aisle can make shopping for these foods confusing. The expert info that follows should clear this all up for you.

Do adults really need cow's milk?

The nutrients that milk supplies are important because they help counter age-related muscle and bone loss, says Lena Beal, RDN, a spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. One cup has 8 grams of protein, about a quarter of the daily value for calcium, and 14 percent of the daily value for vitamin D. It also provides magnesium, potassium, vitamin B12, and more. But you don't need to get these from milk. Yogurt, kefir, and cheese have them, too. And it's okay to skip dairy altogether if you eat a variety of healthy foods with these nutrients, such as salmon, sardines, tofu, and dark leafy greens, says Zhaoping Li, MD, chief of clinical nutrition at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA.

Is cow's milk healthier than plant milk?

Dairy milk has a wider array of nutrients. Plant milks such as almond, oat, and coconut are usually fortified with calcium and vitamins A and D, but they have no vitamin B12 and little protein. They're also lower in magnesium, potassium, and other vitamins and minerals. (Soy milk, however, has 7 grams of protein per cup.) If you choose a plant milk, make sure it's fortified with calcium and vitamin D.

Do I have to drink nonfat milk?

Newer research indicates that the fats in milk aren't linked with weight gain, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, or inflammation. A cup of nonfat milk has about 20 fewer calories than a cup of low-fat milk. For that amount of savings, choose the one that you prefer tastewise.

Why do I have trouble digesting dairy all of a sudden?

Lactose intolerance is common in older adults because the production of lactase, the enzyme in the small intestine that helps us digest the natural milk sugar lactose, declines with age. Your ancestry may be a factor as well. "The prevalence of lactose intolerance is higher among Asians, African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans when compared to Northern European heritage," says Christine Y. Lee, MD, a gastroenterologist at the Cleveland Clinic. It also may be that you've lost the ability to process dairy simply because you haven't had it for a while, she says. Slowly reintroducing it may correct the problem. If not, go with lactose-free options—or take a lactase enzyme pill like Lactaid when you do choose dairy.

Is Greek yogurt better for you than regular yogurt?

There are some differences, but either is a great pick. Both supply protein, calcium, potassium, and probiotics. Greek yogurt is higher in protein. For example, three-quarters of a cup of nonfat plain Stonyfield Organic Greek Yogurt has 16 grams of protein; the same amount of its nonfat plain regular yogurt has 7 grams. Regular yogurt has 70 more mg of calcium.

Does cheese raise cholesterol?

Several studies have found that the saturated fat in cheese has a neutral effect on LDL ("bad") cholesterol levels. One reason may be that the way nutrients and other components in cheese are structured affects how its saturated fat is processed by the body. A 2015 study in Food & Nutrition Research looked at people who ate nonfat cheese, regular cheese, or hardly any cheese for eight weeks. Cholesterol levels didn't increase in either group that ate cheese, and some people saw improvements.

PHOTO: ADOBE STOCK

Lift and Carry More Easily

Strategies to help you move heavy objects safely—and with less effort

ARE YOU FINDING it a little more difficult to lift grocery bags out of the car or carry cooking pots from the stove to the sink?

It's not uncommon as the years pass. A study of nearly 5,000 adults, published in the journal Work in 2013, found that people in their 40s were able to comfortably hoist 17 percent more weight than those in their 60s. "As we get older, we tend to lose muscle mass, which relates to decreases in strength," says Jennifer Brach, PhD, PT, a professor of physical therapy at the University of Pittsburgh. "If you have less strength, it can be harder to carry something heavy." Cardio capacity declines with age, too, so you may tire faster than you used to when carrying a heavy item, says Todd Manini, PhD, co-director of the Claude D. Pepper Older Americans Independence Center at the University of Florida, in Gainesville. Joint, muscle, nerve, and flexibility issues can also make tasks like moving furniture and placing luggage into overhead bins more difficult. Here's how to make this all easier, and ensure that you don't fall or otherwise injure yourself.

Set Yourself Up for Success

Regular exercise can counteract some declines that make lifting and carrying harder. "As people become more sedentary, they become weaker," says Manini. Aim for at least 150 minutes of aerobic activity like brisk walking, cycling, or swimming weekly. Strength-train at least twice a week to keep your muscles strong. Stretch regularly for flexibility.

At home, place heavy items you use often in easily accessible spots on shelves or cabinets—not high up or low down. Ensure the area is well lit and free of trip hazards. For the same reason, wear well-fitting, supportive shoes that stay securely on your feet—no slip-ons.

Whether at home or out, break up loads so that each one is lighter, even if you have to make multiple trips. That may mean fewer items in each grocery bag or a smaller laundry basket. "Think of it as exercise," says Brach. "The more trips you make, the more steps you're getting."

Lift and Carry the Right Way

› **Prepare your body.** Five minutes of walking or marching in place, squats, and shoulder rolls will loosen joints and warm up muscles so that they're ready to work.

› **Get close.** Slide or pull the item you plan to lift toward you—ideally, it should be no more than a few inches away from your body. "The farther away the object is, the more force it puts on muscles and joints," Manini says.

› **Stand with feet shoulder-width apart.** A wide base of support provides stability for lifting. Tighten your abs, too, to help protect your back.

› **Use your legs, not your back.** That means bending your knees and squatting to pick up an object that's below you (say, on the floor). "Your legs are bigger muscles," says Manini. "They were designed to do this." Don't bend at the waist, because it may strain your back.

› **Lift with care.** Keep your head up and your shoulders back, and hold the object at waist height, close to your body. Then straighten your legs. As you carry the item, stand straight, make sure it's not obscuring your vision, and take small steps. To set it back down, tighten your stomach muscles and squat slowly.

Helpful Tools to Try

An inexpensive grabber tool extends your reach by up to 3 feet, which is helpful if you have trouble bending down or getting items on high shelves without a stool. These are useful for lighter items like a can of soup. If you need to use a step stool to reach objects above you from time to time, choose a two-step model with a wide base and a handle to hold on to.

For furniture and other weighty objects, you can slip round disks called sliders underneath them to slide them across a floor. And if you must climb stairs to do laundry, a bag is a safer alternative to a basket. You can pull it while holding on to the stair railing, and it won't obstruct your vision.

A cart with wheels offers a trouble-free way to move heavy items like multiple full shopping bags when you're out and about. Many are foldable, so they can be kept conveniently in your car. A car organizer (these typically have bins, nets, or straps) keeps objects from sliding deep into your trunk, where they can be hard to reach. At home or out, if you're carrying items like books or a laptop, consider a backpack. This evenly distributes the weight and keeps the objects close to your body, which is more comfortable than a bag that you hold at your side or carry on your shoulder.

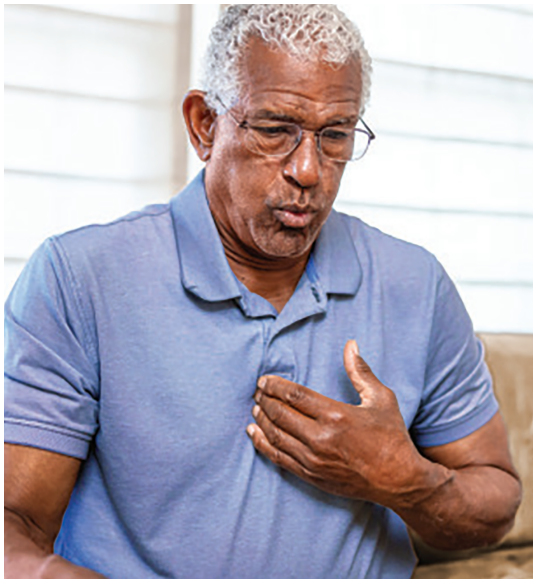
LEARN

For exercises that can improve your balance, go to CR.org/balancemoves.

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Smart Ways to Keep Heartburn at Bay

You may have heard that some reflux meds are risky. Read on for the right steps for relief.



HEARTBURN AFFECTS at least 20 percent of adults, and it becomes even more common as we get older. Fortunately, there are highly effective medications to treat the condition. Some of them come with risks, but a few smart strategies can help mitigate them. Plus, changes in your lifestyle can help reduce the need for medication or eliminate it altogether.

Aging and Heartburn

Acid reflux occurs when acid from the stomach travels back up the esophagus. That can cause a burning sensation in the mid-chest that's commonly referred to as heartburn. People who experience frequent and severe heartburn often have a condition called gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD). As we age, the esophageal sphincter that's supposed to keep stomach acid from coming back up can weaken, says Mona Rezapour, MD, a gastroenterologist at UCLA Health.

"Older adults are also more likely to have other chronic health issues that can increase the risk of heartburn and GERD," Rezapour says. "And treatments for some of those conditions can hike the risk of reflux as we age."

Using Medication Wisely

Proton pump inhibitors are one of the most popular and effective treatments for GERD. Over-the-counter PPIs include omeprazole (Prilosec and generic), esomeprazole (Nexium and generic), and lansoprazole (Prevacid and generic).

PPIs work by reducing the amount of acid that the stomach produces. But those medications can also have adverse effects. "The risks I review with my patients–and monitor them closely for–include kidney disease, GI tract infection, and increased bone fracture risk," Rezapour says. "We regularly check blood work and, for women at risk of osteoporosis, keep an eye on bone mineral density."

Recently, PPIs have gotten some bad publicity, namely a few studies linking their long-term use to an increased risk of dementia, heart attack, and cancer. While this news has alarmed many people, other studies haven't found an increased risk of those conditions.

"The key takeaway is that some of these studies may have generated unfounded concerns because they did not really prove cause and effect," says Andrew T. Chan, MD, MPH, a gastroenterologist and chief of the clinical and translational epidemiology unit at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. For instance, people who take PPIs often have medical conditions–such as obesity, high blood pressure, and diabetes–that are also associated with an increased risk of dementia, heart attack, and cancer.

PPIs aren't the only option for treating heartburn. H2 blockers (such as the OTC brands Pepcid, Tagamet, and Zantac) also reduce the production of stomach acid. They can provide faster relief on an as-needed basis for people with less severe or occasional heartburn; PPIs are geared toward long-term acid reduction. And because H2 blockers are less potent, they may also cause fewer side effects.

"You should always aim to take the lowest amount of medication for the shortest duration possible," Chan says. "And you and your doctor should continually reassess the risks vs. benefits."

Lifestyle Moves That Work

With just a few changes, you might be able to alleviate heartburn symptoms or even prevent GERD altogether. "It's ideal if you can control symptoms in other ways so that you'll have to take less medication," Rezapour says.

In a 2020 study published in JAMA, researchers analyzed the diets and lifestyles of more than 42,000 women. They found that adhering to an "anti-reflux lifestyle" could prevent nearly 40 percent of GERD symptoms. According to Chan, key factors include not smoking; consuming less than two servings of coffee, soda, or tea per day; following a diet focused on fruits, vegetables, lean meat, fish, and unprocessed grains; doing at least 30 minutes of moderate to vigorous exercise daily; and maintaining a healthy weight.

"These steps could go a long way toward reducing your risk of heartburn," Chan says. "And for some people, lifestyle changes alone are enough."

LEARN

For more on lifestyle steps that can ease heartburn, go to CR.org/heartburnrelief.

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

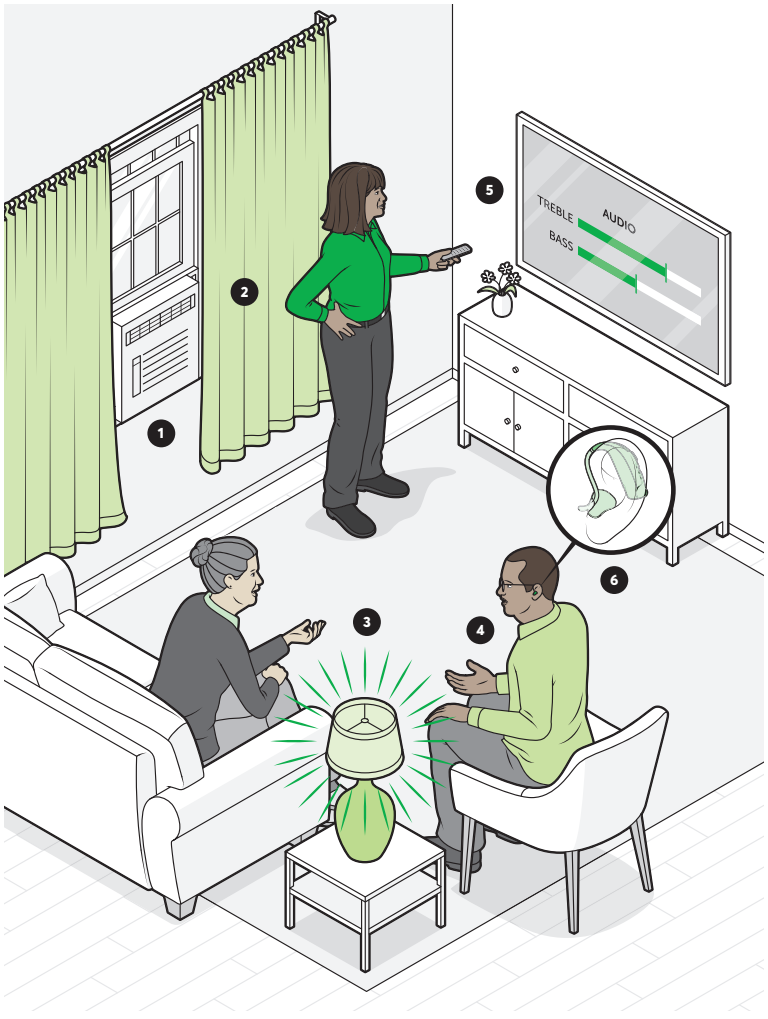
Hear Better at Home

Small tweaks, like adjusting lighting and TV settings, can make a big difference

HAVING DIFFICULTY HEARING the TV or the dinner table conversation? A few simple steps may make a big difference—with or without a hearing aid. Here, tips from James Willcox, CR's senior electronics reporter covering TV, and Clarice Myers, AuD, a faculty audiologist in the department of otolaryngology-head and neck surgery at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine in Bethesda, Md. She's also the audiological consultant for CR's over-the-counter hearing aid testing.

1 TURN DOWN THE NOISE

Are you in a group conversation and can't hear what everyone is saying? Try reducing ambient noise by muting the TV or radio while talking, or temporarily turning off a loud air conditioner or dishwasher. If you have an older appliance that makes a lot of noise, consider replacing it with a quieter model. (CR tests large appliances for noise levels; members can find our ratings at **CR.org/appliances**.) You can also take a small conversation to another room and close the door to reduce extraneous noise.



2 MAKE MINOR HOME CHANGES

Heavy curtains not only block out street noise: They can also dampen reverberation inside a room, which can help you hear more clearly. Carpets and rugs do the same.

3 IMPROVE LIGHTING

You might not think lighting is related to hearing, but during conversations we get a lot of information from other people's facial expressions and body language. Optimizing your lighting can be useful. Try adding table lamps and other lighting that can better light up faces. Increasing overhead lighting may not be helpful, because it can cast the faces you're looking at in shadow.

CR'S EXPERT
James Willcox
is CR's senior electronics reporter.

4 CONVERSE STRATEGICALLY

When you're speaking to another person, do so face to face to get the full benefit of nonverbal cues. If you still can't hear what they said, ask them to rephrase. Slightly different words, intonation, or articulation may make more of a difference than simply raising the volume.

5 EXPERIMENT WITH TV SETTINGS

Your TV may have special audio settings that can enhance dialogue. You can also use "night mode," which lifts softer sounds and lowers loud ones. Or try turning down the bass a bit (it can mask dialogue) or boosting the higher-frequency sounds you may have trouble with. Some TVs can even stream audio directly to hearing aids via Bluetooth.

6 CONSIDER HEARING AIDS

Over-the-counter hearing aids are now available for people with mild to moderate hearing loss. (If you're not sure about the severity of your loss, see an audiologist for a hearing test.) Self-fitting OTC models, which allow you to tailor the aid's settings to your hearing loss, can cost as little as $499 per pair. For prescription aids, big-box stores such as Costco may offer good value. See more at **CR.org/hearingaids**.

ILLUSTRATION: CHRIS PHILPOT

On Your Mind

QUESTION OF THE MONTH

I feel nauseated after taking certain vitamins. What can help?

Taking a dietary supplement on an empty stomach can lead to nausea, says Julie Stefanski, RDN, a spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. So can consuming too much of a vitamin or mineral. (And depending on the type of vitamin, how much you take, and for how long, this can have more serious effects.) She recommends checking labels on supplements and fortified foods you eat regularly to get a sense of how much of different vitamins and minerals you're consuming and whether it's higher than recommended amounts. Switching to a gummy supplement could help, too.

Is chewing sugarless gum bad for my teeth?

No, and it may even discourage cavities. Chewing gum stimulates the production of saliva, which can help neutralize tooth-enamel-harming acid produced by bacteria in mouth plaque (sugar-sweetened types can also increase the likelihood of cavities). When it comes to specific ingredients, in an analysis of 21 sugar-free gum studies, xylitol-sweetened varieties lowered levels of cavity-causing bacteria Streptococcus mutans, and one of the studies found that gum with erythritol did not. Another review found that sugar-free gum with xylitol also reduced tooth plaque, while gums with sorbitol didn't.

Which meds can I take for pain if I've had an alcoholic drink?

It's safe to take acetaminophen (Tylenol and generic), ibuprofen (Advil and generic), or naproxen (Aleve and generic) after a drink or two once in a while. But if you drink more than that, especially if you do so regularly, these pain relievers can cause problems, says the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. Mixing acetaminophen and more than three daily drinks hikes the risk of sudden liver failure. Taking ibuprofen or naproxen a couple of times a week plus having one or more daily drinks could increase the risk of gastrointestinal bleeding.

What can help me stay balanced while walking?

If you're concerned about falling, start by talking to your doctor. They can determine whether a health issue or medication may be causing unsteadiness. They can also refer you to physical therapy to better your balance, says Emily J. Fox, PhD, director of neuromuscular research at Brooks Rehabilitation at the University of Florida in Jacksonville. Supportive, well-fitting shoes with a nonslip sole (that are in good condition) can also help, and using walking poles can provide extra stability and improve your posture. Practice with them at home first so that you're comfortable using them.

TALK TO US

HAVE QUESTIONS?
We'll answer those of general interest. Write to CRH, 101 Truman Ave., Yonkers, NY 10703 or go to **CR.org/crh** to contact us by email.

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